



McCartney House, Parkwyn Village:

Frank Lloyd Wright Architect

by Helen E. McCartney

To my most helpful
friends, John and Judy
Helen

Preface

At the urging of her many friends, Helen McCartney has been persuaded to write down her remembrances and thoughts about building, and living in a Frank Lloyd Wright house in Parkwyn Village, Kalamazoo, Michigan. The McCartney house embodies qualities Frank Lloyd Wright used in his Usonian houses, such as use of natural materials, cool shaded interiors, and a close relationship with the site. Usonian houses were small homes designed to be built at moderate cost, based on blockwork with individual and interesting architectural details. They are further defined by S. Dale Northup in, Frank Lloyd Wright in Michigan: "The Usonian House aims to be a natural performance, one that is integral with site, to environment, to the life of the inhabitants, integral with the nature of the materials...Into this new integrity, once there, those who live in it take root and grow..." . John Sergeant in his Frank Lloyd Wright's Usonian Houses, states "...in such examples as the McCartney house of 1951 in Parkwyn Village, Michigan, with wooden shelving and hardwood-faced plywood ceilings there is a fine contrast with the regular blockwork." In his introduction, Sergeant states, "The chief advance of the Usonian houses was to evolve a way of building, which was subsequently varied to suit differing sites and clients....Each house was different, yet each one used

what Wright called the same “grammar.” The McCartney house is described by S. Dale Northup in, Frank Lloyd Wright in Michigan, as “...perhaps the most dramatic Usonian House designed by Wright at Parkwyn Village. The shallow hip roof has acute 14-degree angles that make up the roof pitch on two of the three corners of the house. It is the second Usonian House in Michigan to use the diamond-shaped module. One razor-sharp eave is cantilevered 18 feet from heel to toe almost attempting to touch the adjoining slope.” This house has been lived in by the McCartney family for fifty years with very little changes made as the family grew and the town surrounded Parkwyn Village and its rural atmosphere.

Wesley Peters, vice- president of the Frank Lloyd Wright Foundations, as quoted in Frank Lloyd Wright in Michigan, referring to the Galesburg-Parkwyn groups, said, “...These two projects were always dear to Frank Lloyd Wright and the fact that through the concerted efforts of respected individual clients the projects that actually came into being meant much to him”. The Galesburg-Parkwyn Frank Lloyd Wright “villages” are an important contribution to the architectural heritage of Kalamazoo County and a tribute to those individuals who had the courage to involve themselves in new architectural concepts.

I became interested in Art History while living in New York City in 1943, working as a cryptographer for the United States Navy. There were great museums in the city, their contents waiting to be explored and understood. To learn more, I enrolled in a class in Art History, taught by a well known refugee professor living in New York City. Researching information at the Metropolitan Museum for a paper required for credit in the class was an awakening for me. I found I loved history, especially art history. When I was discharged from the Navy, I rode the train to Ann Arbor and enrolled in graduate school as a candidate in history. I was introduced to a young dental student in his final semester. He had read Ayn Rand's The Fountainhead, whose hero was rumored to be the controversial architect, Frank Lloyd Wright. Its air of excitement and romance remained with both Ward and myself.

After we were married, while Ward was the dentist on a Navy ship, working off Truk Island, I returned home to Warwick, RI., and pursued my interest in art. I visited museums and read books about the new furniture being sent from Scandinavia and other countries, now that the war was over. I remember vividly a photograph of the Noguchi coffee table, triangular in shape, which won a design award at MOMA, and which Herman Miller would begin to manufacture. We later purchased one for our Frank Lloyd Wright, triangular home.

In August of 1948 Ward started a practice of dentistry in Kalamazoo, Michigan. Because he had attended Kalamazoo College we had many contacts and were welcomed into the community. A friend from dental school days invited us to a meeting of a group that had bought 42 acres of land, the old Harvey Farm, southwest of town. We found the group friendly, well educated, and interested in procuring a certain way of life for their growing families. It was at this point that Frank Lloyd Wright entered our lives and has had a profound effect for over fifty years.

We arrived at a most momentous time in the development of Parkwyn Village. The meeting had been called to approve the application of a black woman, a graduate of Kalamazoo College, and a teacher in the public schools. She was unmarried at the time, and had one daughter. Instead of the pleasurable meeting of new people we hoped to be our neighbors one day, we were indoctrinated with a cataclysmic difference in feeling about living with a black person as a neighbor. The by-laws stated that none should be excluded by reason of race, color or creed. This was the test. Those who did not really expect to be faced with the reality when they signed the initial agreement and bought their lots, and found that they could not live in such a place, withdrew from the group. Unfortunately, the by-laws stated that they were to have their lot payment refunded by the remaining members of the group. We had not yet paid

for our lot so were faced with a dilemma that proved to be one of the crossroads of our lives. I wanted to wait until our first child was safely born to buy a lot, so it was January before we formally were accepted into the idealistic remains of the group.

Rae and Bob Levin had already started construction on their house. When I saw their house in its unfinished state, I was thrilled by its beauty, and knew that we had to have Wright design one for us. He was at this time well known, famous in fact, for his Imperial Palace in Japan; his Falling Water house designed for the Kaufmanns of Pittsburgh; the Larkin building; the Johnson Wax company headquarters, and later Johnson's home, Wingspread. He was interested in our community experiment, with its jointly owned amenities, as a social experiment similar to Broadacre City, (which was never built). Parkwyn was to become a smaller version of his Broadacre City. Middle and upper middle class families could live in beauty surrounded by open space. This proved to be most true.

In January of 1949 we wrote Wright and the Fellowship at Taliesin in Wisconsin, requesting plans for a \$15,00.00 house! By now we had one child, and another due. There followed correspondence with the Fellowship. They requested pictures of the site, and a topographical drawing of the lot in order to facilitate placement of the house on the land. The group, now called Parkwyn Village, had contracted with Wright to

lay out roads and house sites for them. This resulted in a most unusual plan of round lots with triangular spaces between to be planted in bushes and trees that would provide cover for birds and animals . Each lot was to be at least an acre, and in the center of the circle of roads were areas set aside for park land, on which later were built a ball diamond, a tennis court, playground and picnic areas. The design of each Wright house in Parkwyn Village is based on a different geometric shape. We chose lot #27, (later 2662 Taliesin), in the northwest corner of the plat, which had a distant view of Lorenz Lake, and access to Asylum Lake, where one could swim, skate and ski in winter, and walk year around. Our acre of land cost \$1,650.00, of which \$650.00 would be refunded when we connected to electricity. Though our acre originally had a view of Lorenz Lake over the years small trees have grown up along the verge and obscure the view in summer when they leaf out. The lot is bordered by large, old cherry trees on the North side, and slopes southward toward the lake . Wright believed that houses should be situated below the brow of the hill, which is what he did with ours. Thus we are sheltered from winter winds, but summer breezes waft up from the water. The word Taliesin means, in Welch, brow of the hill.

In the meantime, roads were being built, gravel only, and muddy after a rain. Pipes were being laid for water, gas, and telephone. Consumers Power announced that it would be necessary to be hooked up to their gas service

by fall, as they could only take a limited number of customers. By late summer we were anxious to start the foundations so as to be able to heat with gas. This was 1949 and returning servicemen were intent on fulfilling the American dream of owning a home. We contacted Taliesin East and urged them to finish our plans. They wrote back that they were almost ready.

One beautiful summer day we arrived at Taliesin in Wisconsin, after informing the fellowship of our intentions. We walked into the drafting room, an awesome experience. Mr. Wright rose from a drawing board, greeted us, and extended toward us a sheaf of blueprints. He said "Your house is an experimental geometric form: a triangle, or several of them, almost a star. I hope you will enjoy living in it". We were overwhelmed to be in the presence of the great man, and then to be given such a gift. The fees were just 10% of the cost of the house, so it did seem a gift! The plans included some furniture designed by Mr. Wright. We were transported, and never questioned the practicality of living in such a house. Wright was the master and we trusted him implicitly.

With the precious plans in our possession, we departed for home and the problem of finding a contractor who would be willing to build a triangular house. Our footing contractor, Mr. Little, was most efficient, but no master of geometry. He started pouring footings in the kitchen area, but was not able to bring the footprint to

closure. It was necessary to move the kitchen wall out two feet. This was fortunate for us, as this made our kitchen larger than those in most of Wright's other houses. The footings were finished on the first unit in time to qualify for gas heat. By unit I mean the living room, study, kitchen, screened porch and divided bath. Two more bedrooms were included in the plans to be built after the first phase was complete.

The house was to be constructed of concrete blocks designed by Wright, each wall double with an air space in between for insulation. At this time, the Levins were constructing their house using a concrete mixer to produce the blocks. The Browns were waiting to begin their house. The decision was made to fabricate a mold from which blocks could be manufactured. As Ward was a dentist, just starting a practice, he had an extra day a week to spend on construction. He and Eric Brown spent the winter fabricating a mold from which the blocks could be made. The mold was first made of wood, which then was cast in metal and polished to a fine finish by Eric and Ward. Eric was able to find a foundry, owned by Bob Mason, that would manufacture the blocks. Concrete was poured into the mold, the resulting blocks were laid on steel palettes to be cured by the sun.

Procuring materials, especially steel, during the Korean War years was a problem. Eric Brown introduced us to the Anthonys from St. Joseph, who were also

contemplating building a house designed by Wright. They were able to supply us with steel; loaned us \$2000.00 with which to buy plywood; and supplied us with piano hinges for cabinet doors. We repaid the loan within a year and they invited us to dinner in celebration of the event.!

In the meantime, the association tried to procure financing for the homes through FHA. We waited all winter for acceptance, but were turned down due to the round lots. As financing by a federal agency was the least expensive way, the group decided to square off the lots with Mr. Wright's help. This was done, but not soon enough for us to use FHA. We approached First Federal Bank of Kalamazoo, but were turned down. The bank said if we defaulted on the loan, "No Dutch couple would be interested in buying such a house". Finally we were able to finance the house through Equitable Life Insurance Co.. Fidelity Federal Bank, then owned by the Burdick brothers, was approached for a construction loan. Helen Burdick, who was very interested in promoting art and architecture, came to view the partially built house. She understood that this was an important building in post-war architecture in Kalamazoo, and urged her husband to loan us the money to get the house half built, at which time we would qualify for a mortgage. We will always be grateful to them for their understanding and help.

In the Spring, we started laying the blocks as high as we were able. Helping us were two Kalamazoo College students, Kermit Pike and Noble Arndt. The three men laid the blocks on the footings; steel rods were inserted into the grooves; then soupy concrete was poured around the rods, both horizontally and vertically. Mixing the cement was my job, as the buckets were too heavy for me to lift to the site. By now we had a two year old and a baby, who sometimes accompanied us to the site. When we had the blocks as high as we could reach while using scaffolding, we hired a workman to finish the job to the thirteen foot height of the kitchen mass. This tower contained the furnace, utility terminals, living room fireplace, and water softener. In the meantime Miller Lumber and Pittsburgh Glass Co. were milling our French doors from solid African mahogany, which was glazed with quarter inch plate glass. Before their installation, the roof was built. We bought a third of a carload of African mahogany to use throughout the house.

My parents had come from Florida to help in any way they could, including loaning money. When my father viewed the construction, he notice that the window mullions had slanted out somewhat. He put a plumb line on them, and realized that the roof was not tied across the A frame properly, and was pushing outward. We were devastated to think that Frank Lloyd Wright had made a mistake in design, as well now we faced the problem of paying to have it corrected. We contacted

Wright and he sent Wesley Peters, from the Fellowship to help us. The problem was solved by jacking up the roof, then tying the sides of the triangle together with steel rods running from the living room windows over to the utility mass, then securing these with concrete poured around steel plates threaded into the rods. Fifty years later, the house has not shifted at all. The only damage done was to our confidence.

In the Spring of 1951, Mr. Wright made a trip to Kalamazoo to see the houses under construction. He was being driven down the road, ready to turn into our driveway, when he looked at the house, saw that we had put in a door off the kitchen, unauthorized on the plans. He said, "McCartney put that door in. Drive on!". That he could see this from the road was remarkable, as he was in his eighties. At that time the trees had not grown up, and no carport roof was yet in place to obscure the view from 200 feet. Later in a letter, he relented and wrote, "O.K. on the door." We never found him difficult, but rather cooperative and helpful as long as we liked what he offered !

Finally in July 1951 we moved in. The perforated blocks in the kitchen mass (my kitchen window), did not as yet have the plastic inserts, so mosquitoes were free to enter the house. At that time the room off the living room served as master bedroom, and the closet, fitted with makeshift bunks, as the children's bedroom. Immediately, we started to build the two bedrooms

provided in the plans, one with two beds for the girls and the other with one bed for our son. Ward built some of the furniture drawn on the plans including desks, bookshelves, a backless couch, mahogany bed frames and four triangular mahogany dining tables. There were plans for dining chairs, which were not built. Later additions to the house included, a tool house and two carports; making the screened porch into a dining area; turning the original carport into a bedroom; and the hallway into a space for a washer, dryer and second bathroom. The latter was accomplished by filling in the roof overhangs, thus eliminating the major expense of more roof. We always wrote to the fellowship telling of our new ideas for expansion and requesting plans. Always they responded in a timely fashion, and agreed that these ideas could be carried out.

We journeyed to Taliesin a second time for one of the additions, and were invited to stay for dinner with the Fellowship. It was arranged at the cocktail hour that we were to meet with Frank Lloyd Wright. We sat by the fireplace, alone with the Master, who was most kind to us. He looked at us and said, "You're the young couple who had trouble with your roof." We answered that Wesley Peters, whom he had sent to help us, had provided enough support and advice that the problem was solved. Then, lest he be embarrassed by the lapse in his engineering skills, we hastened to say that we loved our house, and were most grateful for his unique and beautiful plans. We chatted further until the call for

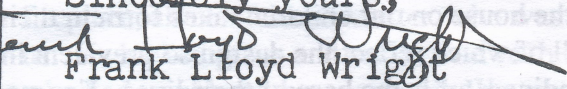
dinner was heard. Dinner, which was food grown in the Taliesin gardens, was served by apprentices, as we sat at small tables set on a balcony overlooking a stage. After dinner the architects and wives were expected to perform on instruments, read poetry original to them, or act in short plays. Everyone was elegantly dressed in suit coats or long dresses. Then the film Genevieve, was shown. This was a first release from Hollywood; we were impressed that Mr. Wright had procured it before it had reached the theaters. Our contacts with Frank Lloyd Wright and the Fellowship were most pleasant. We felt they cared about us as individuals with specific needs.

In closing, I would like to say that the house has, indeed, made a profound difference in our lives. We live in close contact with nature. The multiple windows provide an ever changing view of animals, such as woodchucks, squirrels, rabbits, fox and deer; the seasons and their effect on my gardens and the surrounding woods; and the sky, the grass, or the snow. The effect of living in the house on our children takes form in their vocations, all of which reflect the design so prevalent in their surroundings; art is the base of their lives. For me, living in the house has become romance, adventure and challenge. And add the birds calling and pecking on our windows, and I think you will understand why our family has lived here fifty years in gratitude to Frank Lloyd Wright.

Ward B. McCartney, Jr. D. D. S.
608 Hanselman Building
Kalamazoo

Dear Dr. McCartney: Glad to have you
on the Parkwyn roster - send your lot
selection and topographic survey,..if
you please.

Sincerely yours,

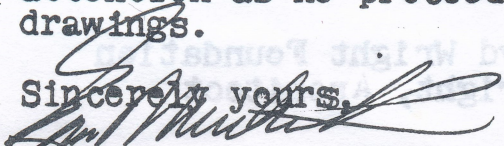

Frank Lloyd Wright

July 12
1949

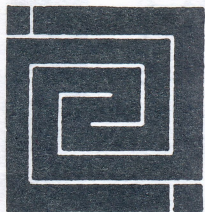
2
Dr. Ward McCartney
304 Parker Avenue
Kalamazoo
Michigan

Dear Dr. McCartney: This is to
acknowledge your recent letter with
your requirements for your house.
These will have Mr. Wright's careful
attention as he proceeds with the
drawings.

Sincerely yours,


Eugene Masselink
Secretary to Frank Lloyd Wright

August 2
1949



T A L I E S I N

Dr. Ward McCartney:
On account for preliminary studies according to
conditions of architect's services herewith:

5% of \$15,000.00, proposed cost \$750.00

The Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation
Frank Lloyd Wright, Architect
Taliesin
Spring Green
Wisconsin

September 14th, 1949

Dear McCartneys: About ready . . .

and very nice!

Faithfully,

Frank Lloyd Wright

February 14th, 1950

Dr. and Mrs. Ward McCartney
1919 Brentwood Avenue
Kalamazoo
Michigan

Dear McCartneys: O. K. - and thanks.

Sincerely,

Frank Lloyd Wright

April 18th, 1950

Dear Mr. and Mrs. McCartney: Mr. Wright left for England this morning. Jack has asked me to write saying that he did speak to Mr. Anthony and that you should have heard from him by now.

Mr. Wright approved an outside door for the Utility Room.

Sincerely yours,


Eugene Masselink

Secretary to Frank Lloyd Wright

June 27th, 1950

Dr. and Mrs. Ward McCartney
1919 Brentwood Avenue
Kalamazoo
Michigan

P a r k w y n V i l l a g e
Mrs. Helen McCartney
1919 Brentwood Avenue
Kalamazoo

Dear Mrs. McCartney: Mr. Wright will
have your letter regarding community plant
ing on his return from Europe this weekend

best regards -


Eugene Massellink

Secretary to Frank Lloyd Wright

July 25th, 1950

Sincerely,

Frank Lloyd Wright

April 19th, 1950

Mrs. Ward McCartney
1919 Brentwood Avenue
Kalamazoo
Michigan

Dear Mrs. McCartney: You will have your
planting plan in time -

Faithfully,

Frank Lloyd Wright

September 1, 1950

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